

Poisonous Plants

What is a poisonous plant?

Many native and exotic plants are poisonous to humans when ingested or if there is skin contact with plant chemicals. However, the most common problems with poisonous plants arise from contact with the sap oil (urushiol) of several ever-present native plants that cause an allergic skin reaction—poison ivy, poison oak, and poison sumac.

How do you identify poisonous plants?

Poison Ivy



- Eastern poison ivy is typically a hairy, ropelike vine with three shiny green (or red in the fall) leaves budding from one small stem.
- Western poison ivy is typically a low shrub with three leaves that does not form a climbing vine.
- May have yellow or green flowers and white to green-yellow or amber berries.

Poison Oak



- Typically a shrub with leaves of three, similar to poison ivy.
- Pacific poison oak may be vine-like.
- May have yellow or green flowers and clusters of green-yellow or white berries.

Poison Sumac



- Woody shrub that has stems that contain 7-13 leaves arranged in pairs.
- May have glossy, pale yellow, or cream-colored berries.

How do you become exposed to poisonous plants?

- Direct contact with the plant.
- Indirect contact, such as touching tools, livestock, or clothing that have urushiol on them.
- Inhalation of particles containing urushiol from burning plants.

What are the symptoms?

When the urushiol from a poisonous plant gets on the skin an allergic reaction, referred to as contact dermatitis, occurs in most exposed people. Signs or symptoms associated with dermal contact with poisonous plants may include:

- Red rash within a few days of contact
- Possible bumps, patches, streaking, or weeping blisters (blister fluids are not contagious)
- Swelling
- Itching

What is the treatment for a poisonous plant rash?

Anyone who has come in contact with poisonous plants should:

- Immediately rinse skin with rubbing alcohol, specialized poison plant washes, degreasing soap (such as dishwashing soap) or detergent, and lots of water.

- Scrub under nails with a brush.
- Apply wet compresses, calamine lotion, or hydrocortisone cream to the skin to reduce itching and blistering.
 - Follow the directions on any creams and lotions. Do not apply to broken skin, such as open blisters.
 - Oatmeal baths may relieve itching.
- An antihistamine such as diphenhydramine (Benadryl[®]) can be taken to help relieve itching.
 - Follow directions on the package.
 - Drowsiness may occur.
 - If children come in contact with urushiol, a pediatrician should be contacted to determine appropriate dosage.
- In severe cases or if the rash is on the face or genitals, seek professional medical attention.
- Call 911 or go to a hospital emergency room if you are suffering a severe allergic reaction, such as swelling or difficulty breathing, or have had a severe reaction in the past.

How can contact with poisonous plants be prevented?

- Avoid direct contact with poisonous plants.
- Wear long sleeves, long pants, boots, and gloves.
- Wash exposed clothing separately in hot water with detergent.
- Using barrier skin creams before contact, such as a lotion containing bentoquatam, may offer some protection. Barrier creams should be washed off and reapplied twice a day.
- After use, clean tools with rubbing alcohol (isopropanol or isopropyl alcohol) or soap and lots of water. Urushiol can remain active on the surface of objects for up to five years. Wear disposable gloves during this process.
- Do not burn plants that may be poison ivy, poison oak, or poison sumac.

How do I get more information on poisonous plants?

Calhoun County Public Health Department
Phone: (269) 969-6383

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Phone: 800-CDC-INFO
Website: <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/plants/>

Poisonous Plants
Updated 5/22/14

This fact sheet is meant to provide general health information and is not intended to be medical advice or otherwise take the place of your doctor's orders or to diagnose your specific health problems. Check with your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your health.

Calhoun County Public Health Department

190 E. Michigan Avenue, Suite A100
Battle Creek, Michigan 49014
Tel: (269) 969-6383
Fax: (269) 969-6488